

Performing Fugue No. 4

C-Sharp minor

Well-Tempered Clavier Book I

Johann Sebastian Bach

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Subject: Fugue No. 4, *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book I

The ideal performance of this fugue allows the music to speak for itself. I want my piano to serve only as a conduit for Bach's symbolically rich notes.

Imagine the opening bars on a single manual of an organ: the tone is straight, and the color of each voice undifferentiated. The registers are positioned closely so that what emerges is a marvelous accumulation of texture and density. Assuming the resonant spaces that German Baroque organs lived in, it is an accumulation so rich in dissonance that it can be only partially resolved with the passage of time.

The piano does not produce a straight tone, but an attack followed by a gradual decay. Technical methods (varying the speed with which the hammer strikes the string) allow for some variation in the strength of attack and the character of decay. The pianist must be continually aware of this, especially as it affects the sustaining power of notes in their various durations.

A whole note must have enough resonance to last until the beginning of the next bar. So the opening of this fugue is difficult, especially as I have conceived it as a pianissimo. Half notes decay for a shorter time, so they need a different (lower) level of attack. Quarters, if attacked the same way as wholes or halves, will end up sounding like a march.

Listen carefully to the exposition and notice how each duration is given a different attack. But contrapuntal clarity requires not so much the bringing out of specific notes (voicing), but of carefully shaping each melody. The challenge is linear and horizontal. This requires the performer to *feel* each interval and

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direction as it implies a distinct character. The subject, with its descending half-step, rising diminished fourth, descending half-step, and descending whole-step, presents a particularly rich set of affective possibilities.

Listen to the subject. Notice that the E is strongly dissonant even in its first statement--without other voices to make it that way. This is because our ear provides an underlying dominant harmony (implied G-sharp in the bass). The melodic gesture from B-sharp to E compels us to pull against the implied bass. If you have a keyboard near, try singing the second and third measures of the fugue while playing a G-sharp below. You should feel incredible tension in the E, resolved by the downward movement to D-sharp.

In contrast, listen to what happens when Bach alters the diminished fourth by expanding it into a perfect fourth in bars 29-32. Here the bass voice states the subject in B Major and the fourth is A-sharp to D-sharp--perfect. The claustrophobic darkness of the opening has been transformed by this tiny alteration into an illumined and open space.

It is important to feel the quality of dissonance in a physical way. The poignancy of this fugue is a product of dissonance and its resolution, both melodic (as in the subject) and harmonic (the interaction of two or more voices).

The B Major entry reveals how a ray of light can be cast in the shadows through a lessening of dissonance. But the overarching emotion of this fugue is lamentation, as Bach has reminded us with a viscerally disturbing chord in the coda. Such angst cannot be adequately resolved in the remaining bars. In resignation they (and we) must accept it.